

Pittsburg Morning Sun (Kansas)
April 16, 2005

CAFTA Fair and Smart
By John Schlageck

No country can rival the United States in offering consumers worldwide a diversity of superior agricultural products. From robust grains from the Heartland to fresh vegetables from California, U.S. agricultural products are the best. That's why America is the world's largest agricultural exporter.

U.S. agriculture is 2.5 times more reliant on trade than other sectors of our nation's economy. Still, U.S. agriculture exports face substantial trade barriers. The global average tariff on agricultural products is 62 percent, while the average tariff on nonagricultural products is just 4 percent.

Congress is about to consider the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the free trade agreement that would open the Central American markets to U.S. agriculture, as well as most all other U.S. export products. The countries involved in CAFTA currently have tariffs as high as 150 percent on U.S. agricultural products.

The CAFTA countries also have a combined population of more than 40 million. That's significantly larger than California.

Anyone who says that free trade with Central America wouldn't be a windfall for America hasn't asked a farmer because, on this at least, we agree. It is essential that Congress pass CAFTA.

Right now, it's a one-way street with these nations. We need to ensure the road runs in both directions.

By passing CAFTA, the United States can expand our business opportunities. CAFTA is expected to boost U.S. agricultural exports by as much as \$1.5 billion when fully implemented.

The CAFTA agreement will level the playing field. With U.S. consumption stagnant, access to rapidly expanding markets, such as those in the CAFTA nations, is critical for U.S. agricultural growth.

With the passage of CAFTA our country can continue to build on a good thing. The United States is already the largest source of agricultural imports to these Central American countries with \$1.6 billion in agricultural exports in 2003. CAFTA will allow the United States to compete. Eliminating existing CAFTA-nation agricultural tariffs will help U.S. farmers rival their counterparts from Canada, Europe and South America.

There is no question, CAFTA will benefit nearly every major U.S. agricultural sector. This free-trade agreement will knock down those high tariffs in Costa Rica, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

CAFTA will open up these nations to U.S. exports the way our markets have been open to their goods for years. That's not only fair, it's a smart way of doing business.

John Schlageck has been writing about farming and ranching in Kansas for 25 years. He is the managing editor of Kansas Living, a quarterly magazine dedicated to agriculture and rural life in Kansas.